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ABSTRACT

The television writer's creative expression is limited by executive forces, conflicting philosophies, and restrictive regulations. In a 1972 poll by the Writer's Guild Committee on Censorship, it was revealed that an overwhelming majority of television writers felt personally censored by the industry. Although the success of character comedies such as "All in the Family" has opened up some channels for dramatic realism, the Department of Broadcast Standards and Practices and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) still exert tremendous pressure over such controversial aspects as violence and language. The "family hour" concept, a case in point, has adversely affected the development of television realism. Perhaps the most insidious form of censorship, that which is self-imposed, is also the result of restrictive policies. If freed from constraints, writers would not inundate the networks with violence or pornography. Rather, they might provide a broad spectrum of mood, style, and content. (KS)

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FREEDOM AND CENSORSHIP IN DRAMATIC TELEVISION WRITING

by

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"The Freedom to Create: The Artist's Right to Interpret Reality"
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Despite the collaborative and unpredictable nature of the television industry, the writer is still the first creative artist. He is the one who puts pen to paper; he is the one who creates the story, characters, dialogue, and action, as well as the framework for vizualization and thought. His artistic expression, however, is severely limited. The writer's creative juices are bottled up at every turn by a barrage of executive forces, conflicting philosophies, and restrictive regulations. I would like to explore this situation with you, and provide some insights into the untenable position held by writers in the television medium.

In 1972, David Rintels served as chairman of the Writer's Guild Committee on Censorship. He reported his findings to the Senate Subcommittee on Consitutional Rights in Washington.[1] The results are startling, to say the least: (1) 86% of all television writers felt personally censored in the industry; (2) 81% felt that a distorted picture of reality was being presented on the television screen --

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specifically in the realm of politics, economy, and racial problems; (3) 92% felt that television programming did not function in the public interest, convenience, and necessity -- as required by law. The thrust of the Writer's Guild Committee argument --- which was highly effective and disconcerting -- was that seventy-five million viewers were being fed deliberate misrepresentations of the truth, every night in their own living rooms, during prime-time viewing hours.

The report went on to describe specific violations of artistic freedom and the right to interpret reality. The long-running "F.B.I." series was one of the worst offenders on record. No writer could ever suggest that the F.B.I. used controversial strategies for investigation, e.g., tapping a phone, or hiring an informant. No writer could ever touch upon the reality of civil rights as an issue -- it simply did not exist in the world of television. Similarly, no writer could ever deal with problems of anti-trust -- it was too "sensitive" an issue. No writer could ever allow his F.B.I. character to kill anyone -- despite the fact that, in reality, agents must learn to shoot to kill. As for the hierarchy of censorship on the show, all stories had to be cleared first at QM Productions (the producing company), then at the F.B.I. -- who, in fact, screened all talent (writers, actors, directors), and hired only those who were politically acceptable. The stories then moved on to ABC-TV for approval, and finally to the highest rung on the censorial ladder -- the Ford Motor Company. If any misgivings arose in any area, from any source, the story was simply not produced. Perhaps the most out-

rageous practice of this television series, was the fact that no woman writer, nor any black writer, was ever hired to create an episode -- despite the wishes and demands of the writing community.

Time has ushered in some changes in attitudes, but those changes have recently been nullified by the repressive Family Hour conditions; more on that later. The fact remains that television approaches realism with the outstretched hand of a manic-depressive. One day it seems open and willing to test realistic formats and themes; the next day it retreats behind archaic barriers.

It has been a long tradition in the history of playwriting, that comedy and satire pave the way for experimentation with contemporary themes. From the times of Aristophanes and Menander, through the times of Moliere, contemporary trends and attitudes were first reflected in the comic form. Drama eventually incorporated those themes of relevance --after the audience was properly weaned. In our own days, "All in the Family" set the stage (and it took several <u>years</u> to get on the air in America). Once audiences were provided with an opportunity to laugh at the sensitive issue of bigotry, all comic forms quickly changed. You don't hear of situation comedy any longer; you hear of <u>character</u> comedy. You don't hear that Ozzie and Harriet can't decide whether to go on a picnic with the boys. Instead, you hear that Maude will be going in for an abortion; that Rhoda's mom is considering an affair; that Arthur must challenge his own alcoholism; that Edith may have breast cancer. These are hardly "uproarious" themes -- but they <u>are</u> dealing with crucial and relevant issues of the times. More important, from the network standpoint,

they're bringing in the Nielsen numbers.

The success of character comedy opened up new artistic channels for dramatic realism in Movies-of-the-Week. For the first time in television history, writers were permitted to explore "forbidden" themes -- prostitution, civil rights, police brutality, rape, homosexuality, divorce, and even the simple but sensitive theme of human dignity. The networks took a "wait-and-see" stance; lo and behold, no avalanche of objections poured in. Even more surprising, the ratings seemed respectable.

I think it is no accident that Movies-of-the Week became the initial dramatic testing ground for the evolution of this kind of realism in television. As writers were given more freedom to interpret reality, executives could test audience reaction on the air without fear of losing a loyal weekly following. Movies-of-the Week" were"one-shots" with no pre-established audience to offend. Similarly, motion pictures with "adult" themes suddenly became "suitable" for airing.

As the ratings climbed for Movies-of-the-Week, the networks began to realize that there <u>is</u> an audience for weekly realism, and they exploited those findings appropriately."Kojak", for example, was originally a Movie-of-the-Week called "The Marcus-Nelson Murders". It was written by Abby Mann, directed by Joe Sargent, who told me he was working on the three-hour tv film because he wanted fifty million people to see it and react to it. The film dealt with a law enforcement investigator who fought for a young black man wrongly accused of rape and murder. The story

was a true one and the audience response to the film had an immediate and lasting impact on the case, itself; it also had a significant impact in the ratings. The network responded by ordering a weekly series created around the central character. Spinoffs and creative imitations became the rage.

With an increase in realistic drama, an old thorny question reappeared -- how much violence can the writer put into his script for the sake of authenticity. The question of limiting realistic violence on television is as old as the TV Western. Semantics alone, however, can shoot holes into any of the best formulated arguments. A few years ago, when I was a Program Executive at Columbia Pictures Television, I was shown a content analysis which defined violence as an act perpertrated by one person against the will of another. Using that definition, our studio was guilty of producing the most violent show on television--"I Dream of Jeannie".

I don't wish to make light of the violence issue. Clearly the problem is multi-faceted. It is one which all writers must face and all viewers must battle. The network stance, however, leaves a great deal to be desired ; they provide confusing, ambiguous, and unnecessarily rigid rules which totally dumbfound the writer and the producer. The network instinct to overreact is the source of artistic censorship in one of its most blatant and arbitrary forms.

Dave Kaufman, for example, revealed in Daily Variety[2] that Matt Helm must kill no more than two people in a script--otherwise

the network won't permit the show to be aired. Similarly, Matt Helm can carry a gun and point it, but he can't touch anyone with the gun. The network somehow feels that these restrictions assure that the writer, producer, director, and actor will not offend America-- or more precisely, they will not offend the sponsor or the F.C.C.

These absurdities are paralleled by restrictions in dialogue. Motion pictures on television can be expicit, but episodic shows must be whitewashed. Last season, an episode of "Barney Miller" was kept on the shelf because of the line: "You got a helluva lot of nerve". The network refused to air the show until the line was changed to "You got a heck of a lot of nerve." 3 Who can blame the writer for cursing when the rules for selling a script are so "gosh-darn-golly-gee whiz"-awful?

When I speak of rules, regulations, and network censorship I am talking primarily about the Department of Broadcast Standards and Practices (previously called the censor). They review every step of a writer's work, from storyline and treatment,to first draft and shooting script.They decide upon the "proper" degree of violence, the "acceptable" boundaries of morality, the "appropriate" barometers of decorum in action, character, and dialogue. They literally review every episode of every show that gets on the air. These are some representative comments on a writer's script:

Act I Scene 1, p. 1 - Delete the word "damn", replace with "darn".

p. 2 - Swim suit must not reveal cleavage .

p. 3 - lead character must not say "Oh God" unless delivered in a relevant manner .

p. 4 - Characters in embrace must not kiss passionately or with open mouth

This kind of watchdog mentality is uncomfortably reminiscent of Shakespeare's England where a line in the First Folio of 1623 was changed from "what the devil" to "what the Dickens". The Puritans were protecting society from the evils of Shakespeare's pen. They would feel very much at home in Twentieth Century America -- especially if they watched television during Family Viewing Hour.

The restrictions on the writer are also reminiscent of Neo-Classic times where strict rules and formulas prescribed a tragedy's "proper" form, theme, characterization, dialogue, and action (or lack of action). Corneille and Racine were the only tragic writers to emerge from that arena of irrational decorum. I wonder how many other potentially great writers could not surface through the weight of creative chains. We might ask the same thing about our own time.

If we examine the real problem of violence and immorality in the television script, we find that it reverts straight back to the network's own policies and philosophies. Last year the Journal of the Producers Guild of America[4] analyzed trends in television violence for the 1973-1974 season An increase was reported in themes of law enforcement, crime, and the occult. The study also reported that 80% of all young male characters are involed in some form of violence and that young, single women are the group most likely to be killed on television. Let's

examine these findings in the light of the writer's work and the network needs. Scripts dealing with the themes of law enforcement, crime, and the occult were most likely to be written because they were the most likely to be sold. The networks found that they did consistently well in the ratings; thus, they wanted action.

As for all the young people in jeopardy, who are the most likeable and identifiable characters for a writer to create? From the standpoint of the network the answer is clear--young, pretty people. They are more likely to bring in the proper demographic audience for the sponsor. As for the vulnerable position of the single young woman in television, I don't believe there is a writer alive who has not heard the network call for more stories about women in jeopardy. Young single women are, by far, the most attractive, identifiable, and susceptible for consumption by TV violence. The network <u>wants</u> it that way; the writer <u>must</u> create it that way to sell scripts. Thus we have an ironical situation: the network dictates its own trends in the realm of creative writing, then finds those trends unacceptable, thereby instituting severe and indiscriminate rules which further restrict the writer's right to interpret reality.

The network fear of excessive violence of television, or more specifically, their fear of F.C.C. reaction, led them to conceive the ill-fated "Family Hour" concept. The notion is certainly worthy in theory, i.e., the writing and development of

quality programs for the whole family to view. The network, however, has overreacted once again, and we have the prime-time censorship rule in practice. It is ambiguous, arbitrary, and unaccountably restrictive on the writer's right to create.

A research poll reported by TV Guide [5] claims that eight out of ten Americans favor the "Family Hour " concept, but that is a deceiving figure since only 42% of the respondents were even familiar with the practice. More importantly, who would put himself on record speaking out against the idea of a family hour. That is tantamount to attacking mom, apple pie, and football. The fact is, when it comes to viewing the shows, America would rather do other things. Virtually all of the new "Family Hour" shows were axed by the three networks for lack of viewer response: no dramatic action, no interest in viewing.

An interesting reflection on the effect of family hour was offered by David Gerber, who is head of production at Columbia Pictures Television. At a lunch before the Hollywood chapter of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, he remarked that " TV's family hour has managed to do something that the leaders of our country haven't done in two decades. The programs are so boring they are bringing the family back together again."[6]

Family Hour has adversely affected the creation and development of that staple of realism, the Movie-of-the-Week. The networks have cut back on their commitments to air feature films and to develop original television films because tney are too adult-oriented for families to view. Thus, the networks have totally

reversed their stance on contemporary drama. They are now "protecting" America against the ravages of reality, controversy, poignancy, and thought.

Perhaps the most insidious effect of the Prime-time Censorship Rule is the fact that writers subject themselves to "self-restraint" in the creation and execution of ideas. They have learned to pre-censor themselves, in anticipation of network responses. That chill of pre-censorship is not limited just to writers. It affects every professional in the television industry. Producers, also, try to second-guess network reactions, and become instant gate-keepers in the process. For example, a friend of mine had written a Movie-of-the-Week in which an aging, black boxer gets into the ring for the last time. The boxer is urged by his son not to go on with the fight. "What does it matter to you?", the father asks. There is a long dramatic beat as the son, alienated up to this point in the story, turns to his father and cries out: "It matters because I love you!" The writer received the final shooting script back from the producer -- and was astonished to see the last line changed. The son no longer professes his love for his father, but rather says, "I don't want to see you beat up, Old Man." The producer, it seems, was afraid the network would object to homosexual implications between father and son.

The incident is certainly not isolated. The fact is, writers cannot write freely or meaningfully in Hollywood. Similarly, producers, directors, and actors cannot function without the breath of network censorship dictating their every move. Taking these conditions into

account, the Writers Guild of America initiated a legal suit against the networks and the F.C.C., and was joined unanimously by the other creative guilds -- Producers Guild of America, Directors Guild of America, and the Screen Actors Guild. The suit contends that the F.C.C. applied pressure to the networks, threatening investigation into the subject of children's programming, and that the networks -- to appease the F.C.C. -- purposefully devised the "vague, unconstitutional, and appealingly titled" Family Hour.

David Rintels, who is now President of the Writers Guild of America, West, is one of the most outspoken and literate defenders of artists' rights in the prime-time censorship battle. He shared these thoughts with the press:

> We (writers) are the first victims when scripts are censored. The American people are the real victims. TV is a medium of communication, as are movies and books. You cannot communicate without saying anything...and if you reduce the level of 'acceptable' ideas to the level of ideas which the networks determine no single family in America will find disturbing, then you are reducing content to zero. Yet that is the standard which has been forced upon us and upon you.[7]

Ideas are controlled by the network, content is controlled, the image of reality is controlled. Executives fear they will unleash a violent and reprehensible monster if the writer were given the freedom to create; if the producer were given the freedom to develop; if the director and actor were given the freedom to render reality. The fact is, that creative artists today -- as in all times, in all countries, in all ages -- seek to communicate new and vital perspectives on the nature of the human condition. They wish to

share a vision, not a nightmare. Writers would not inundate the television screen with violence or pornography; that is the network's own paranoia. Rather, writers might provide a broad spectrum of mood and style, through individual reflections of hope and despair, thought and escapism, drama and comedy, tragedy and satire. If writers were truly free to create, just think of the wealth of material available for viewing, the wealth of choices available for the American public. The viewer would suddenly be aware that he, too, has a freedom of choice, and not just a choice of sameness on each channel.

Perhaps the healthiest sign ever to come out of the television industry, is that the creative community has united in its court battle against censorship. The court decisions will have ramifications on the freedom to create for every writer, producer, director, and actor in the television industry. The final outcome will define the very guidelines for interpreting reality on the television screen, and will serve as a basis for providing more sophisticated viewing alternatives for seventy-five million Americans.

FOOTNOTES

1. David Rintels, " Statement Before the Senate Subcommittee on Constitutional Rights", February 8, 1972.

2. Dave Kaufman, "'Matt Helm' Removal From Gov't. Spy Biz in New Franciosa Series", Daily Variety, August 21, 1975, p. 11.

3. "ABC Says No To 'Barney Miller' Lingo", Daily Variety, August 20, 1975, p.1.

4. George Gerbner and Larry Gross, "Violence Trends in Television", The Journal of the Producers Guild of America, March, 1975, pp.9-12.

5. Neil Hickey, "Does America Want Family Viewing Time?", TV Guide, December 6, 1975.

6. "Gerber Urges Resistance to 'Family Hour'-Inspired Censors", Daily Variety, September 24, 1975, p. 14.

7. Reported in Dave Kaufman, "A Real Family Hour Spat: Constitutionality Issue in Suit Filed Against Webs, F.C.C., N.A.B.", Daily Variety, October 31, 1975, p. 17.